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AUTHOR Tobias, Sigmund; And Others
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ABSTRACT

In a study which investigated whether there was bias in assigning students to special educational services, 199 teachers from different ethnic backgrounds responded to a specially constructed case history in which the ethnic background of the student was varied, by indicating whether they felt the youngster could be maintained in a classroom, or should be referred for specialized services. Results indicated (1) no evidence for bias according to the youngster's ethnic background, (2) differences in the incidence of referral by ethnic background of the teacher, and (3) an interaction which indicated that teachers tended to refer students whose ethnic background was identical to their own less frequently than they did youngsters of other ethnic backgrounds. (Author)

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Bias in the Referral of Children to Special Services¹

SIGMUND TOBIAS & CARRYL COLE

City College, City University of New York

and

MARA ZIBRIN & VERA BODLAKOVA

Graduate School and University Center, CUNY

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Bias in the Referral of Children to Special Services

The field of special education has received enormous impetus in recent years from the passage of federal legislation providing increases in specialized educational services in the schools. The purpose of the present study was to investigate whether minority students are referred for such services more frequently than others, and to determine whether teachers from various ethnic backgrounds differ in the frequency with which they initiate such referrals. Finally, the interaction between ethnic background of students referred and teachers making the referrals was also examined.

There is evidence to suggest that children from minority socio-economic backgrounds are referred for special educational services more frequently than are other students. Tucker(1980) studied a large racially representative sample of 50 schools (involving over 40,000 students) in the Southwestern United States for an eight year period during which special education programs were developed in these districts. Tucker's data suggest that there is a larger proportion of blacks in learning disabled classes than comparable groups, leading to an increasingly disproportionate number of blacks in special education classes in general.

Lietz and Gregory (1978) investigated the incidence and type of office referrals to a multi-disciplinary team. Significantly more black children were referred to the office than were white children, but no

Differences between races were found for special education referrals. It was reasoned that office referrals reflected the teacher's judgement that disciplinary action was required, whereas referrals to the multi-disciplinary team implied special education placement. These two field studies, then, suggest that minority children were referred more frequently for specialized services.

Matuszek and Oakland (1979) investigated recommendations for special services made by 76 teachers and 53 psychologists using fictitious case histories of 106 children. Demographic, behavioral, and individual difference information was used to generate these histories. Each of their subjects was asked to read ten or eleven case studies and make recommendations regarding appropriate placement for the individual described in the case history. Matuszek and Oakland found that both teachers and school psychologists did not consider racial-ethnic characteristics as important as other factors when making recommendations for placement in special classes or to special schools. Giesbrecht and Routh (1979) found evidence of bias in the opposite direction, that is, elementary school teachers expected more favorable educational progress and less need for special help for black children and for those children of less educated parents than for white children, or children of well educated parents.

The studies reporting evidence of bias were based on actual referral information while the investigation reporting no evidence of bias used specially prepared case history material. It would appear that the type of controls required to investigate the problem of a disproportionate incidence of referral to specialized educational services for minority school children are difficult to set up in the day to day life of the

classroom. When actual referral records are utilized there are insuperable problems of imposing appropriate controls. For example, it is impossible to select youngsters from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds whose behaviors are equally at variance with accepted school standards and who are equally well known to teachers. The careful controls to be obtained by systematically varying an artificial case history, therefore, suggest that such a strategy may well be the optimal one for investigating this problem.

Previous studies of bias in referrals to special services employing specially prepared case histories did not find evidence for bias against minority youngsters. In order to follow up the apparent discrepancy between these findings and those utilizing actual referral information it was decided to investigate a number of related questions: 1) To clarify previous findings, will youngsters from minority backgrounds be referred for specialized services more frequently than other students? 2) Will there be differences in the instance of referral to specialized services attributable to the teacher's ethnic background? and 3) Will there be any interaction between the student's and teacher's ethnic background? Previous studies had not investigated the effect of teacher ethnic background systematically, and no investigation has studied the interaction between teacher and student ethnic backgrounds.

Method

A case history was prepared in such a manner that the youngster's ethnic background could be easily varied. The history was then administered to teachers of different ethnic background who were asked whether the youngster should be referred to specialized educational services.

Procedure

A case history of a 16 year old male youngster in the 10th grade was prepared.² He was described as performing about a year below grade level while in elementary schools, and as having difficulty following directions, spelling words and performing mathematical calculations in 10th grade. In addition, he was reported to be verbally and physically abusive.

The same case history was presented to all teachers, and altered in only one respect. On the first line the youngster's ethnic background was described as either being: black, Hispanic, white or no ethnic identification was supplied. At the end of the vignette respondents were asked a variety of questions regarding appropriate treatment for the youngster. Among these were the following questions, which were combined to form the dependent variable of this investigation: "The student is best taught in a regular classroom." Another question asked "I would refer the student for special educational services." Both questions were answered on a four point Likert Scale ranging from "completely disagree" to "completely agree." In addition, teachers responding to the vignette were asked to supply a variety of identifying biographical data, including their own ethnic background.

The four versions of the vignette were randomly administered to all teachers. That is, any teacher had an equal chance of receiving the same vignette in each of the four versions.

Subjects

A total of 199 teachers responded anonymously to the questions based on the case history; 81 of these teachers were black, 31 Hispanic, and 87 white. The teachers were recruited from graduate education classes, and from faculty meetings in a variety of schools.

Results and Discussion

The dependent variable had a range of 2-8 points, and scores were transformed so that the high scores indicated that respondents felt the youngster should be referred for specialized services, and low scores meant that he should be maintained in a regular classroom.

Insert Table 1 about here

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and number of cases categorized by ethnic background of teacher and student ethnic identification. The data were then submitted to a 3 (teacher's race = black, Hispanic, white) X 4 (student's background = black, Hispanic, white, and no ethnic background) analysis of variance. That analysis indicated that there were no differences on the dependent variable among the various student identifications. ($F = 1.17$). There were significant differences among the three ethnic groups of teachers with respect to the dependent variable ($F = 10.11$; $df = 2, 187$; $p < .01$). The data in Table 1 show that teachers of Hispanic background had higher preference for maintaining the student in the classroom while white teachers tended to recommend special education. The Scheffé procedure indicated that scores of white teachers were significantly different from those of the black and Hispanic teachers ($p < .05$).

The interaction between student identification and teacher ethnic background was also significant ($F = 3.42$; $df = 6, 187$; $p < .01$). Comparisons computed on the data in Table 1 indicate that regardless of their own ethnicity teachers tended to refer students from ethnic backgrounds other than their own more frequently for specialized educational services than

they referred the youngster if he was identified as belonging to their own ethnic group. Black teachers, for example, were less likely to refer the youth for specialized services when he was identified as being black than when he was described as being white or Hispanic ($F=8.20$; $df=1, 77$; $p < .01$). Similar tendencies were shown, by tests, for Hispanic teachers ($F=5.72$; $df=1, 27$; $p < .05$) and for white teachers ($F=5.32$; $df=1, 83$; $p < .05$).

The results of this study are similar to those of Matussezek and Oakland (1979) and those of Giesbrecht and Routh (1979) in finding no evidence of bias in the referral of youngsters to special educational services simply along ethnic lines. On the other hand, data reported from field based investigation, (Tucker, 1980; Lietz & Gregory, 1978) reported that minority youngsters are actually referred more frequently for such services than students from majority ethnic backgrounds.

Previous results may be less contradictory than would first appear. Children from minority ethnic backgrounds may, as a result of poverty and/or values prevalent in their ethnic group, experience greater difficulties in schools oriented to middle class values than do majority youngsters. Furthermore, teachers may be unfamiliar with the values of the minority group, and hence regard behavior which is quite appropriate within the minority culture as being inappropriate in the middle class culture of the schools. Thus, for both of these reasons, minority youngsters may be referred more frequently for specialized services since their behavior is at variance with school standards, though there is no specific bias against their particular ethnic group by the referring teachers. The results of this investigation, and

their consistency with other experimental studies compared to the inconsistency of field based investigations support such an interpretation.

The findings of this study do not confirm suppositions that teachers will, in general, refer more minority youngsters for specialized educational services than comparable youngsters belonging to majority ethnic groups. Instead this study reveals a more subtle phenomenon. There appears to be a strong tendency among teachers to be positively biased when they evaluate the behavioral problems of youngsters belonging to the teacher's own group. The boy described in the case history in this study tended to be referred for special services more frequently when he was identified as belonging to an ethnic group different from that of the responding teacher.

The reasons for the present findings are difficult to interpret. One possible interpretation of the results is that teachers tend to be biased in favor of the ethnic group to which they belong, compared to other groups. On the other hand, teachers may be more aware of the mores and acceptable behavior of their own ethnic group and, hence, judge it as being less serious than that of groups with which they are not so familiar. It remains for further research to clarify the difference between these proposed explanations.

The conditions of this investigation impose some caution on the generalizations to be made from this study. There were relatively few (n=31) Hispanic teachers in the present sample, hence care should be taken in drawing implications from the findings applicable to this group. Furthermore, all of the subjects were recruited from the New York City metropolitan area. Many of these teachers were employed in schools in which the student population was heavily composed of minorities while the majority of teachers tended to be white. The judgement of teachers, and their perception of the

relationships among students and between students and teachers may have been affected by these variables to some unknown degree. Replication in areas where there are different student and teacher ethnic ratios would be helpful in generalizing these findings to other areas.

Footnotes

1. A report on this research was presented at the annual convention of the American Educational Research Association, Los Angeles, April 1981. Preparation of this paper was supported by the Institute for Research and Development in Occupational Education, Center for the Advanced Study of Education, City University of New York. Requests for reprints should be sent to the senior author at the Institute, 33 West 42nd Street, New York, NY 10036.
2. The case history and related materials utilized in this study, and complete tables of results have been deposited with the ERIC documentation system.

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TABLE 1

Number of Cases, Means and Standard
Deviations for All Groups

		Teacher Identification			
Student Identification		Black	Hispanic	White	Row Total
Black	N	22	3	19	44
	M	3.91	5.00	5.63	4.73
	SD	1.5	3.00	2.2	2.1
Hispanic	N	20	10	22	52
	M	4.80	3.20	6.00	5.00
	SD	1.5	1.2	2.0	2.0
White	N	20	6	24	50
	M	5.90	5.00	4.83	5.28
	SD	1.9	1.7	2.1	2.0
No Race	N	19	12	22	53
	M	4.84	4.00	6.23	5.25
	SD	2.1	1.2	1.7	2.0
Column Total	N	81	31	87	199
	M	4.85	4.03	5.66	5.08
	SD	1.9	1.6	2.1	2.00

TABLE 2
Analysis of Variance of Dependent Variable

<u>Source</u>	<u>df</u>	<u>Mean Square</u>	<u>F</u>
Student Ethnic ID (S)	3	4.03	1.17
Teacher Ethnic Status (T)	2	34.93	10.11*
S X T	6	11.82	3.42*
Error	187	3.45	
Total	198	4.02	

*P < .01

Case Study

Directions: Please read the case study below. Then answer the questions that follow. You may believe that more information is required but use your best judgment to respond anyway. Do not write your name or any identifying marks on these papers.

Charles E. is a 16⁴ year old *White male student enrolled in a regular tenth grade senior high school program. He lives in a four room apartment with his mother and two older siblings. His mother is homemaker and his father a cafeteria worker. His school record through the first six grades shows that at the end of the sixth grade he was reading at the 5.0 level in reading skills, 4.7 in reading comprehension and 4.3 in arithmetic calculations. He reads hesitantly and frequently uses context clues to guess at words he does not know.

He appears to have a disorder in the area of understanding spoken language which interferes with his ability to listen to verbal directions, spell words and perform mathematical calculations. According to the elementary school anecdotal records

*Ethnic background was changed also to read Black, Hispanic and No Race indicated

his behavior was described as verbally and physically abusive toward other children and teachers. When reprimanded for classroom misbehavior he frequently yelled, screamed and cursed at the teacher. In gym he frequently refused to share equipment with the other children. On occasion he would throw chairs and other things at teachers and others. He was reported to work well when he first came to school in the morning and immediately after lunch. In his records there are indications of short periods of time when he is engaged in quiet activities.

Questionnaire

Directions

You have just read the case study of a tenth grade child. Please respond to every question below. Although you may believe that there is not enough information provided, make a guess anyway. Mark your answer directly on the sheet provided. Circle the appropriate answer on the rating sheet provided below each item.

1	2	3	4
Completely Disagree	Generally Disagree	Generally Agree	Completely Agree

1. This student's overall intellectual ability is probably in the

A) slow-aver range	B) aver range	C) br. aver range	D) superior range	E) don't know
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2. This student is best taught in a regular classroom

1	2	3	4
Completely Disagree	Generally Disagree	Generally Agree	Completely Agree

3. This student is experiencing normal developmental problems.

1	2	3	4
Completely Disagree	Generally Disagree	Generally Agree	Completely Agree

4. A regular classroom teacher can help this student without referral to a specialist.

1	2	3	4
Completely Disagree	Generally Disagree	Generally Agree	Completely Agree

5. This student's behavior is a result of a learning disability.

1
Completely
Disagree

2
Generally
Disagree

3
Generally
Agree

4
Completely
Agree

6. I would refer this student for Special Education services.

1
Completely
Disagree

2
Generally
Disagree

3
Generally
Agree

4
Completely
Agree

7. This student is severely disturbed.

1
Completely
Disagree

2
Generally
Disagree

3
Generally
Agree

4
Completely
Agree